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Securing the neighborhood: China's evolving security footprint in Central Asia

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Introduction

On September 7, 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered what is now regarded as a landmark speech that called for establishing a new "Silk Route Economic Belt" to become the basis for a new mode of cooperation between China and its Central Asian neighbors.[1] The initiative would later come to be known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encompassing over 70 countries and an estimated over $1 trillion investments to upgrade infrastructure in partner countries in what many regard as Beijing's most important foreign policy initiative in modem times.

The location of Xi Jinping's announcement was hardly coincidental. China shares borders with three of the five Central Asian states and, since the 2000s, its engagement with the region has been a strategic priority. Still, given the post-Soviet origins of the Central Asian countries and their enduring ties with Russia, Chinese officials have always been careful to downplay China's role in the region, especially in the security sphere. Indeed, for many years, Chinese officials and Western analysts talked of an emerging "division of labor" in Central Asia between Russia and China, in which Russia would provide public leadership and security guarantees. In contrast, China would ensure supplies, investment, economic cooperation, and upgraded infrastructure. Whether this was indeed an emerging alliance or merely an "axis of convenience" remained highly debated among foreign policy observers.[2]

Many aspects of the BRI can influence international relations currently being studied, including debt, regulatory standards, technology transfer, governance and corruption, and political influence. However, how the BRI will be secured, especially in Central Asia, remains among the most pressing and dynamic questions.

This article will explore how Beijing's previous more limited efforts at security engagement – which were more focused on ensuring the stability of Xinxiang – are giving way to a more comprehensive array of instruments that are intended to secure Beijing's multiple priorities in greater Central Asia. These priorities include securing regional cooperation on its Xinjiang policies, securing BRI investments, and planning for Afghanistan's future following American troops' withdrawal. China is an active and multifaceted security player now in the region.

The 2000s: Securing Xinjiang via Central Asia

China's security interest in the region in the 2000s was driven principally by crafting policies that would help stabilize its restive Western province of Xinjiang. Noteworthy among these are political violence and calls for political autonomy made by its Muslim Uyghur population – currently about 10 million or half the region's population. Throughout the 1990s, Beijing had been dealing with the ethnic minority both with its "strike hard" campaign and an active policy of promoting large-scale investment in the region and settling ethnic Han migrants to spur economic development and assimilation.

The sudden onset of the US-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) in neighboring Afghanistan in 2001 was pivotal for Beijing. On the one hand, Chinese officials seized the opportunity to frame Uyghur-related political expression and violence as part of a transnational network of Al-Qaeda affiliates. Indeed, the US designated,

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in 2004 at Beijing's request, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) on its list of terrorist organizations, a designation that it removed earlier this year to the objection of Chinese authorities.[3]

On the other hand, the sudden US emergence in the region in the wake of 9/11 – particularly Russia's agreement to allow military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – led Chinese officials to quickly press ahead with solidifying its regional agreements on security cooperation. Most notable among these was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization over the fear that the United States' unexpected entry into Central Asia as a security actor might reconfigure strategic partnerships and leave China isolated.

During the 2000s, the SCO would become a critical vehicle not only for China's security interests but for Beijing's broader efforts to put a multilateral face on its various Central Asia-related activities and projects. Formally founded in June 2001, months before 9/11, the SCO was the successor to the so-called Shanghai Five forum, a group comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan that was tasked with concluding outstanding negotiations on finalizing the delineation of the old Sino-Soviet border. The SCO added Uzbekistan and expanded in 2017 by adding India and Pakistan as full members to create a permanent international organization headquartered in Beijing. That sought to expand regional cooperation on security matters, adopting the Chinese security agenda of combatting the "three evils" (terrorism, extremism, and separatism) and exploring other regional economic cooperation areas.[4]

In 2002, the countries reached an agreement to create a regional anti-terrorism center, established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 2004. The group also began to conduct large-scale biennial military exercises, known as "SCO Peace Mission," including simulating scenarios such as responding to the collapse of a government or "Color Revolution," which happened in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 when the government of Askar Akayev collapsed after parliamentary election day protests. A few years later, in 2009, the SCO Anti-Terror treaty codified several regional security practices, including allowing the investigations by members in one another's territory and facilitating the handover of suspects among member countries with minimal evidence of crimes.[5]

On most matters of regional security and sovereignty, the group unquestioningly backed Beijing's wishes and agenda. For example, in July 2009, following the violent riots in the city of Urumqi, the SCO issued a strong statement in support of Chinese security actions and detentions. This was in contrast to the previous year when, following the Russia-Georgia war, Moscow unsuccessfully lobbied the member countries during the 2008 annual summit to recognize the independence of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. [6]

Throughout this period, China was careful to downplay its regional ambitions and publicly referred to Russia as the region's main political power and security guarantor, even as it secured regional cooperation on its

But the quiet nature of China's security footprint is now changing following the two new compelling regional security interests that have emerged since the mid-2010s. According to current maps, the first was the announcement of the BRI, which has now evolved in such a manner that Central Asia lies on three of the six major BRI transit corridor routes. Second is the perception that the United States is withdrawing from

Afghanistan, announced a 2014 drawdown deadline, and abandoned its transit facility and airbase in Kyrgyzstan the same year, stoking fears about the possibility of a leaving a dangerous regional power vacuum.

In anticipation, China has been especially interested in a more active presence in the region, including helping to facilitate peace talks in Afghanistan and even reportedly offering to negotiate with the Taliban to construct a regional road system to help maintain the peace.[7] As a result, China is set to play a more active security role in the region to keep its investments and prevent the resurgence and neighboring spillover of any conflict in Afghanistan. Over the last five years, Beijing has added three additional instruments to the internal security cooperation it had been pursuing with all Central Asian states.

First, China has introduced a range of new digital technologies and surveillance regimes to Central Asia. Under the banner of bringing the "Digital Silk Road" to Central Asia, Chinese companies like Huawei have brought 5G technology to the region. The outreach includes a $1 billion deal with the government of Uzbekistan and technologies that include facial recognition software, traffic camera networks, and new identity verification systems for purchasing telecommunications.[8]

Many of these technologies appear to be extensions of the "safe city" CCTV systems and surveillance technologies first deployed in neighboring Xinjiang.[9] Some of these have been contracted between Central Asian cities, while others have been supported by soft loans from China or even transferred for free under the safe cities program, leading many to speculate that China will retain access to and accumulate this data for its purposes – including tracking the movements of Uyghurs and suspects on its watchlists. The scrutiny of China's activities is also intensifying in the region, especially in the wake of revelations of China's network of re-education camps in Xinjiang, which caused particular alarm in Kazakhstan, where local NGOs revealed that up to 10,000 ethnic Kazakhs had passed through the camps, many separated from their families in Central Asia.[10]

Second, China has increasingly deployed an array of private security companies (PSCs) to secure BRI-related projects and investments. An important new report from the Oxus Society, based on research on six active Chinese OPSCs in Central Asia, shows how this new Chinese PSC activity appears governed by the 2018 Security Management Guideline for Overseas Chinese-Funded Companies, Institutions and Personnel, which designates PSCs as part of the Belt and Road National Security Intelligence System and encourages them to train overseas Chinese personnel and prepare them for local crisis scenarios and contingencies.[11] The largest of these companies is Zhongjun Junhong, with a central base in Bishkek, which is involved in a range of activities from conducting intelligence and political risk assessment briefings for Chinese businesses, to offering onsite protections services at mines, and protecting the construction sites of the signature regional BRI project, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Railway.[12]

However, as the authors point out, the modes of PSC engagement still vary across the Central Asian states, given that each Central Asian state has adopted a different regulatory environment. Whereas in Kyrgyzstan, foreign PSCs are allowed to engage in armed force protection activities, in Kazakhstan, PSCs are allowed only non-combat roles such as advising and logistical help. The report confirms that Chinese officials have been lobbying Kazakh authorities to amend this regulatory framework to permit a greater array of security activities. In this manner, Chinese PSCs appear to be operating under the supervision and in collaboration

with the Chinese state, unlike some other global cases of freelancing PSCs that appear to be seeking their own commercial concessions (Russia's Wagner Groups) or operating outside of the jurisdiction of its home government altogether (Sandline of the UK).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, a series of investigative stories in the international media have confirmed the stationing of actual Chinese military sources in Central Asia, in a remote mountainous corner of Tajikistan. In February 2019, the *Washington Post* broke the first report that China, since 2016, had maintained troops ("dozens, perhaps hundreds") at a complex of buildings near Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, which was confirmed with sightings of unformed Chinese troops at nearby Tajik towns.[13] A few months later, the *Wall Street Journal* confirmed the story, adding details from the terms of a secret a Chinese-Tajik agreement in 2016, which included allowing Chinese troops mission to "refurbish or build up to 30 or 40 border posts" and patrol large swathes of the Tajik-Afghan independently of Tajik authorities.[14] Tajik officials have refused to confirm the story, maintaining that China's presence is part of a jointly-renovated border post. In September 2020, an Iranian correspondent confirmed Chinese personnel's presence in these areas through her independent interviews.[15]

The Chinese presence in Tajikistan also has important implications for understanding changing regional security dynamics. In 2017, Chinese officials invited an array of Russian security and regional experts to inform about the purpose of China's presence in Tajikistan. Notably, Russia has been the primary external power with the largest deployment in Tajikistan, maintaining 5,000-6,000 troops of the 201st motorized rifle division in the capital of Dushanbe ever since it intervened to prop up the government in the country's civil war of 1992-1993.

In 2016, China signed a new regional security agreement with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan – known as the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) – with terms that included the countries cooperating on counterterrorism efforts, intelligence sharing.[16] Given subsequent reports about a possible Chinese security presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, one possible interpretation of the QCCM might be that it grants a broad legal framework for this expanded Chinese security presence throughout all member countries.

The QCCM – along with the transfer of new security technologies and the new operational footprint of Chinese PSCs – also shows that China is not only interested in broadening its security presence in "Russia's backyard." It seems intent on reconceptualizing the region by linking Central and South Asia as a corridor of broader security cooperation while maintaining ever-closer links between Central Asian officials and security organs at all levels of government.

Going forward, it appears increasingly likely that Moscow will have to acquiesce to Beijing's new security footprint, while growing US-China rivalry may increase strategic competition in the region on a range of security and political issues. The passage in the US of the Uyghur Human Rights Act of 2020 – against vigorous Chinese objections – allows for the broad sanctioning by the United States of business entities and government individuals directly responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang, but also provides mechanisms to lobby and pressure Central Asian countries to deny the extradition of Uighurs to Chinese authorities. In any case, as of the end of 2020, the region traditionally considered Russia's "backyard" has now become China's frontline in its rise as a regional and global great power.

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